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New CIA watchers

WASHINGTON — Oversight is one of this city's favorite nouns. Here it doesn't mean to overlook or forget something, but rather to give watchful care, to monitor, to police.

Congress is supposed to oversee the executive departments, but, in fact, does little. Within the departments and agencies, self-policing is expanding but is limited in the main to finding fraud and waste.

Who oversees the CIA? The answer is mixed. The Senate and House Intelligence committees have such a role but essentially they are passive nay-sayers and second-guessers.

Back in 1958 President Eisenhower, in another act of the "great wisdom" now receiving belated appreciation, created a "President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board." Its basic task was not to be a policeman or to nitpick the intelligence agencies. Its mission was to be positive, to stimulate improvement in the quality and quantity of intelligence.

THE NEXT FOUR PRESIDENTS — Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford — continued to rely on the board, changing the members and some details but maintaining its assignment of reviewing and recommending in an affirmative sense on new and more effective means of collecting critical information. President Carter, however, abolished the board four months after taking office.

Board members, serving part-time and voluntarily, have been a varied lot — top-ranking industrialists, scientists, academics and managers as well as distinguished former diplomatic, military, and intelligence officials.

Recently the Hale Foundation, a pro-intelligence organization, published a brief study extolling the board's record and urging its revival. According to Senate testimony by William J. Casey, the current CIA chief, the "big leaps" in U.S. intelligence collection abilities resulted from the thinking of such board members as Edwin H. Land, the Polaroid camera wizard, and William O. Baker, the great Bell Telephone Laboratories researcher.

BOTH SERVED on the board in several administrations, the Hale study says. It was a panel headed by Land that proposed the fantastic concept of the phenomenally successful U-2 spy plane even before the intelligence advisory board was established.

It was a 1976 board that brought about a change in CIA analysis procedures, which in turn produced a starkly revised and somber estimate of the Soviet military buildup and a pronounced change in U.S. attitudes.

According to Casey, Reagan will appoint a new board of strong and experienced outsiders who will end the insiders' five-year monopoly on truth and insight.

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